

Van Rooi, Leslie
Stellenbosch University

Generation Y and the concept of family. An introductory study of the unique characteristics of Generation Y with specific reference to the concept of family within the context of the URCSA¹

ABSTRACT

In South Africa the identity of the so called Generation Y (Millennials) is discussed and studied frequently in the broader spectrum of the social sciences. Generally these studies indicate that this generation, with its keen tendency towards the family, has a unique understanding of family life, identity(-ies), and the church, amongst others. The effect of the abovementioned comes to particular expression in the context of a residentially orientated university like Stellenbosch University. This article will explore Generation Y's understanding of family. The author will give attention not only to the specific understanding of family but will also ask the question if this understanding allows for families as safe spaces where human dignity is fostered. The effect of the identity and culture of the Generation Y on South African university campuses will briefly be noted.

In a second instance the role and value ascribed to the family by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa will be discussed. The church order and regulations of the mentioned church will form the basis for this discussion. With this it will be indicated if indeed churches like the URCSA realises their role in family life and if their understanding of, and ministry towards families correlates with the current realities of Generation Y.

OPSOMMING

In Suid-Afrika word die identiteit van die sogenaamde Generasie Y (Millenniërs) gereeld bespreek binne die weier spektrum van die sosiologiese wetenskappe. Studies hieroor wys in die algemeen daarop dat hierdie generasie, met sy sterk fokus op die familie, 'n baie spesifieke verstaan het van familieskap, identiteit(-e) en die kerk. Die effek hiervan speel op 'n spesifieke manier uit binne die konteks van 'n residensieël georiënteerde universiteit soos Stellenbosch Universiteit.

Hierdie artikel bespreek Generasie Y se verstaan van familie. Die skrywer gee spesifiek aandag aan die konsep familieskap en 'n fokus op die vraag of families gesien kan word as veilige ruimtes waar menswaardigheid gekweek word. Ook hier sal daar kortliks gewys word op die effek van die identiteit en kultuur van Generasie Y op Suid-Afrikaanse universiteitskampusse.

Tweedens sal die rol en waarde toegeskryf aan familieskap deur die Verenigende

¹ The largest part of this article was presented as a paper at the Human Dignity conference held in Kampen, The Netherlands in October 2010. This conference formed part of a series of conferences with the broader theme of Human Dignity jointly presented by Stellenbosch University and the Protestant University in the Netherlands. The theme of the 2010 conference was: *Dignity at home – and in public.*

Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika bespreek word. Die kerkorde en reglemente van die vermelde kerk sal hier as basis vir bespreking gebruik word. So sal daar aangetoon word of kerke soos die VGKSA hul rol in die bou van families sowel as hul verstaan van ('n) bediening(s) aan families ooreenstem met die huidige realiteite van Generasie Y.

1. INTRODUCTION

The so called Generation Y grabs the attention of an increasing amount of scholars that deal with the identity and impact of the thinking of this generation on society at large. It is of interest to note that not only does the behavioural patterns of this generation receive attention but also the imbeddedness of their identity within smaller groups and here specifically the family. Sociologists, amongst others, are particularly keen to explore a renewed accent on (core) family life as the basis of and for the development of Generation Y.²

This article forms part of a bigger conversation on human dignity and specifically how human dignity comes to expression in the context of the home. The focus of the article is on the so called Generation Y (Millennials) in relation to the mentioned conversation. The author will attempt to explore what the unique qualities are of this generation and, by doing this, certain defining characteristics of this generation as well as its impact on their identities will be discussed.

Specific attention will be given to the context of South Africa and in particular the context of Stellenbosch University (SU). By doing this further attention will be given to the unique challenges and opportunities brought about by Generation Y and how (if?) societal organisations, like a university or a church, respond to these challenges and opportunities.

On a second level the author will look into the particular focus of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) on the education of the youth. Two youth structures within the URCSA will form the lens for the discussion. This will be complemented by a recent survey done by Reggie Nell on places/spaces of faith formation with a specific focus on young people.³ By doing this the focus of churches like the URCSA on ministering to this unique generation will be explored.

The article will be concluded with a short discussion on the abovementioned topics.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SO CALLED *GENERATION Y* (MILLENNIALS)

In order to note how human dignity finds expression in the lives of the Generation Y it is important to know who this generation is and what the term Generation Y refers to. Through exploring the unique qualities of this generation the author will further explore how family life, identity, and the church/religion are understood and expressed by Generation Y.

The Generation Y, also referred to as the Millennials, is the term used to coin the unique characteristics of a generation born roughly between the period 1982 – 2000.⁴ As such they follow on Generation X. Unlike the previous generations it is not as easy to border in this generation and it is therefore no surprise that one of the unique characteristics of Generation

² *The studies consulted in this article use the terms nucleus family, core family and family interchangeably.*

³ *See in this regard Reggie Nell, Places/spaces of faith formation. Reflecting on where we are as URCSA. Unpublished paper, 2010.*

⁴ *Although the experts differ on the exact period of birth of the millennials the abovementioned date represents an excepted timeframe. Millennials are referred to as the postmodern generation, busters, the lost generation, generation DOTCOM, and the net-generation. See in this regard, Estelle Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs in die Afrikaans-klaskamer: Humormateriaal as onderrigstrategie'. In Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig, 2007, 48.*

Y is diversity. Amongst others it can be mentioned that one struggles to box this generation in a specific age or group identity. In this regard Kruger points that one should indeed not try to fully define this generation by their age but by their philosophy of life.⁵

There are however some generically unique characteristics linking Generations Y's outlook on life and their social practices. In terms of their physical appearances and attitude Hestorff states the following: some are clean-cut, others have tattoos and piercings and some are seeking a deeper spiritual meaning to life and still others live lifestyles that would seem outrageous.⁶ Kruger helps us to understand this better when she, through her research on Afrikaans school learners in South Africa, notes the following concerning Generation Y:

'Hulle het grootgeword in 'n milieu waar die toenemende materialisme en welvaart weerspieël word deur die besit en gebruik van 'n televisie, rekenaarspeletjies en die internet. Dié leerders is dus meestal (kwasi-)inligtingsgeletterd as gevolg van 'n toenemende blootstelling aan elektroniese massakommunikasiemedie. Die leerders is meestal voorstedelike kinders van middelklas- of welgestelde ouers; hulle stapelvoedsel kom uit McDonald's; hulle tydverdryf bestaan uit rekenaarspeletjies en inkopiesentrums, en hulle opvoeder is die televisie'.⁷

Hestorff further reminds us that there are other characteristics unique to this generation. He mentions that they have a strong experience of loneliness; that they are too busy and; at times, stressed out.⁸ They further tend to form part of a particular peer cluster/social group that impacts directly on their formation and identity.⁹ It is a generation that are driven to be top achievers and it is therefore no surprise that adolescents spend, on average, twelve hours a day and nearly seventy hours a week in school and extra-curricular activities.¹⁰ This impacts directly on this generation's self-understanding and perceived self-value.

Of interest and perhaps a defining difference between Generation Y and Generation X is that adolescents of Generation Y are not interested in being or becoming popular, fitting in, or conforming to a standardized look and attitude. Hestorff notes that they are however keenly interested in finding a safe place to belong.¹¹ These safe spaces can be found in family life and/or the mentioned peer clusters. These spaces can further be found where adolescents representing of Generation Y find a natural fit.

Regarding the intellectual stimulation of Generation Y Kruger notes that this comes from postmodern philosophers like Derrida and Foucault. She builds her argument on the perception that this generation is extremely critical of anything that is made into an absolute truth.¹² But this, according to Kruger has a direct effect on Generation Y. She notes the following: 'Die gevolg van hierdie verwerping en agterdog is dat hierdie generasie streef daarna om eg en opreg te wees'.¹³ In their striving to be genuine and caring individuals this generation is much more involved and focussed on the wellbeing of others on a variety of societal levels.

Graham Allan mentions that with industrialisation, family life became less important in the broader social realm.¹⁴ For him the biggest shift can be found in the development and movement

5 Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 50.

6 Sam Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*, 2006, vii.

7 Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 49.

8 Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*. 2006.

9 See in this regard, Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*. 2006.

10 Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*. 2006, 15.

11 Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*. 2006, 39.

12 Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 50.

13 Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 50.

14 Graham Allan, *Family Life. Domestic Roles and Social Organisation*, 1990, 5.

from large extended families to smaller nuclear ones.¹⁵ This change in dimension impacts directly on the role of the family – and here specifically parents – in the development of children. In my view this rings specifically true of Generation Y as parents are much more involved in the social development of children.¹⁶ Both Allan's and Hestorff's arguments are strengthened by Kruger's research as she notes the following:

'Verder is hulle (Millenniërs) meestal die middelpunt van hul ouers se belangstelling, verwagtings en ideale, en toon hulle min selfdenke, veral omdat hulle as generasie nie aan baie verliese blootgestel is nie. Daarbenewens is millenniërs groepsgeoriënteerd, rasveelsydig en goed afgerig om te presteer. Om vir die leerbehoefes van hierdie generasie leerders voorsiening te maak, is dit noodsaaklik om alternatiewe onderrigstrategieë te ondersoek.'¹⁷

Together with the apparent shift in the core function and identity of the family in present day it should be noted that, there is also an alarming increase in the amount of cases of divorce especially over the last 50 years.¹⁸ In a real sense Generation Y are the children of a generation that are intimately aware of the effect of divorce on their lives. This directly impacts not only on their parents, but also on their identity through their upbringing.

Whilst taking the abovementioned into account the question can be asked if this understanding of family allow for families to be safe spaces where human dignity is fostered?

As noted in the previous section(s) parents of Generation Y are much more involved in their lives if compared to previous (a) generation(s). As such family life – and here specifically parents – impacts drastically on their lives. From the literature and research on this topic it is clear that parent's place great emphasis on supporting their children in an attempt to secure their success. As such Generation Y is driven towards achievement and living up to the standards set by their parents. Parents' motivation is coupled with a strong sense that anything is possible and that success is something that can be achieved.

Fearing that it might be the case Julia Fionda however warns that, in an adult centred world, we must not set expectations for the current generation that are too high. She is of the opinion that young people will fail to live up to these impossible expectation and, as this happens, our adult perceptions of them might become negative.¹⁹ She further warns that we must not see children as unfinished adults that we must help to develop into full human beings (adults).²⁰

In the context of South Africa one should also take into account that our families cannot always be seen as safe spaces where our children prosper as cases of family-based violence and abuse (of different forms) are extremely high. This should be taken into account in any discussion about the family and specifically a discussion about the function of the family structure in relation to fostering dignity in the household. This being said the questions remains namely if the South African youth can be classified as forming part of what is (loosely) defined as Generation Y. Kruger argues that this is true to a certain degree. She argues that the characteristics of this generation rings true for children born at the beginning of the 21st century and that these characteristics are predominantly prevalent in families in higher income and literacy categories.²¹ As such it can be argued that, in the context of South Africa, it cannot be generally assumed that everyone born in the period between 1980 – 2000 can be regarded as being part and parcel of what is known

15 Allan, *Family Life*, 1990. 5.

16 See in this regard, Allan, *Family Life*, 1990. 6.

17 Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 52.

18 Allan, *Family Life*, 1990. 101.

19 Julia Fionda, *Devils and Angels. Youth Policy and Crime*, 2005, 4.

20 Fionda, *Devils and Angels*, 2005, 22-23.

21 This is the category that Kruger's research is focussed on. See in this regard Kruger, 'Die onderrig van millenniërs'. In *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 2007, 50.

as Generation Y. This is mainly due to the fact that the South African society is characterised by a diversity of social groups with varying economic positions and cultural experiences and exposure.

3. THE EFFECT OF THE IDENTITY AND CULTURE OF THE GENERATION Y ON SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES. WITH SPECIFIC FOCUS ON THE CONTEXT OF STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY (SU).

Institutions of Higher Education presuppose that education is a powerful tool for social change.²² Universities in South Africa currently face the challenge of opening its doors to more students and at the same time diversifying its student population. This ring specifically true for the University of Stellenbosch (SU).²³

As part of its strategic focus to better learning amongst its students, SU recently undertook a study that focused on the *out-of-classroom* experiences of main campus²⁴ students. The focus of this study was to see what directly impacts on the lives of students and what students engage with outside the classroom.²⁵ This study focussed on a number of spheres including issues related to accommodation, time spent between classes, financial support for students, student's involvement in community interaction, religion and spirituality, etc.²⁶

1. Some of the significant findings of the report include the following:
2. No less than a 5th of SU students indicated that they feel lonely on campus. Close to the same proportion of students also did not feel a part of the campus culture
3. Many of the students do not perceive academic related activities as one of the three primary activities that they engage with outside the classroom. Most students indicated socialising with their friends as their main out-of-class activity
4. Students indicate that most of their time spent between classes are spent in public university areas
5. About one third of students state that they participate in voluntary work or community service. Almost half of these students reported weekly participation in community service activities
6. 22% of international students felt that fellow Stellenbosch students/residents treat them like foreigners and 17% felt that the international student society was too diverse
7. 80% of the student population subscribe to the Christian faith. Spirituality and religion play a relatively important role in helping students with their studies, as a determinant of relationships with peers, and in determining personal values.²⁷

Although some of the findings point to a different reality it is interesting to note that most of the findings in the report correspond with the general characteristics and experiences of Generation Y. Of further importance is the fact that students at SU continuously re-group into smaller

22 This idea is shares by a number of other societal actors representative of different spheres including business and the media.

23 For a strategic overview of Stellenbosch University see *The University of Stellenbosch. A Strategic Framework for the turn of the Century and Beyond*. 200. <http://www.sun.ac.za/university/StratPlan/stratdocs.htm> See also Amanda Botha, Chris Brink. *Anatomie van 'n omvormer*, Stellenbosch: SUN Press. 2007.

24 SU has 3 campuses. The campus on Stellenbosch is regarded as the main campus.

25 SU is a medium size residentially orientated university with approximately 27 000 students.

26 See in this regard Nelius Boshoff *et al*, 'Survey of the Out-of-Class experiences of Stellenbosch University Students at the main Campus in Stellenbosch'. CREST. 2010.

27 See in this regard the executive summary of the 'Survey of the Out-of-Class experiences of Stellenbosch University Students at the main Campus in Stellenbosch', i-vii, 2010.

communities or clusters (Hestorff). This is clearly visible in student activities at this residentially orientated university.

As indicated in the previous section, Generation Y experience loneliness even though they might be surrounded by a number of people.²⁸ Of interest to note is the high percentage of students that express a feeling of loneliness on campus. What is perhaps not clearly indicated in the report are the growing amount of parental involvement in student activities and the general engagement of parents in the academic progress of children. Of further importance is the growing amount of curricular and co-curricular activities that students engage with on and off campus. It should be indicated that the SU Centre for Counselling and Student Development expressed its concern regarding the increasing amount of students that experience emotional and physical burnout on campus.²⁹

As indicated by the 'Survey of the Out-of-Class experiences of Stellenbosch University Students at the main Campus in Stellenbosch' it is important that SU, in better dealing with the challenges faced and brought about by its student population, do further research in the day to day experiences of its students. As suggested by Kruger research should also indicate what type of teaching methods can best be used in teaching the current SU student population. In my view this should be complemented by a continuous evaluation of the role of this and other universities with the context of South Africa and Africa.

4. THE GENERATION Y AND THE URCSA?

As indicated in the previous section religion and spirituality plays a relatively important role in the lives of students at SU. 53% of SU students belong to traditional churches.³⁰ These churches include the Reformed branch of the church and thus, amongst others, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the URCSA.

This being said the question can be asked namely how the church understands the apparent gap between generations. And further, how does the church understand the concept of family? In an attempt to answer these questions I will specifically focus on the context of the URCSA. The lens that will be used to interpret this can be found in the URCSA's Youth Brigade regulations as well as the constitution of the Christian Youth Movement as found in the church order of the URCSA.

The two structural focus areas or services that directly links to serving the youth of the URCSA is found in the Youth Brigade (Jeugbrigade) and the Christian Youth Movement (CYM) of the abovementioned church. When reading through the constitutions and regulations of the mentioned ecclesial structures it becomes clear that both these structures are focussed on the (Christian) development of the youth in the church. This is specifically done through Christian orientated, culturally engaged and bodily focussed, ethical education.³¹ Or as the mission statement for the CYM declares: 'The CYM as a service organisation of the Christian Education (CE) in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa aims to form a church youth to become spiritual adult members of the body of Christ, who are competent in the doctrine, active in the mission, service and sacrifice'.³²

28 Hestorff, *YM2K. Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation*. 2006, 1-8.

29 See in this regard the *Annual Report of the Centre for Counselling and Development*, Stellenbosch University, 2009.

30 'Survey of the Out-of-Class experiences of Stellenbosch University Students at the main Campus in Stellenbosch', v, 2010.

31 Stipulation 37, *Church Order and General Stipulations of the Cape Regional Synod of the URCSA*, 206. 2006.

32 Stipulation 38, *Church Order and General Stipulations of the Cape Regional Synod of the URCSA*, 220.

It can thus be said that the URCSA, in her focus on the youth, places great emphasis on Christian education based on the doctrine of the (Reformed) church. This is complemented by practical meetings and engagements with youth members through the mentioned church structures. The question however is if education, and here specifically the method for education, through the mentioned ecclesial structures effectively engage with the need and challenges presented by Generation Y.

A further question that needs to be answered is how the URCSA understand the concept of family. In his research on places/spaces of faith formation Reggie Nel conclude that the best way to prepare young people to live in a world differently than most, as Disciples of Christ is through the structure of the family. This conclusion is based on a survey done amongst the youth of a particular URCSA congregation. The group of young people form a particular coloured community in Johannesburg and form part of a confirmation class of a URCSA congregation of which Nel is the *pastor loci*.³³

Nel notes that the mentioned youth point out that, amongst others, their school, home and church are considered to be significant living spaces.³⁴ Of note in his study is the fact that the youth interviewed placed great – and exciting – emphasise on their future wellbeing. Therefore school was an important role player in the lives of the mentioned children. In this regard the children pointed out that the challenges they faced are those that will impair or block their progress.³⁵

Nel also points out the following:

‘Further these young people also named home or being with family as an important place for them. These (sic) we also see in the interviews where the home, parents, especially mothers, are named as important in all interviews. The reasons they presented, relates to the presence and relationships of family, as well as a sense of safety. Home is a critical space in the development of their sense of self; here they are ‘grounded’ in acceptance, care and love’.³⁶

Nel further points out that all of the children interviewed expressed that they felt safe in their homes. The reason for this sense of security experienced by the youth, where because of the presence of family and parents, whom some would describe as ‘someone who cares’ or ‘people I know’.³⁷ As such it is clear that the family, at least for the mentioned youth, can play a pivotal role as a safe space where they can belong. If it is to be assumed that the youth interviewed by Nel is part of Generation Y the role of their families can be considered to be pivotal in their development.

Nel’s findings correlate with remarks made in this article as it points toward unique characteristics and needs of Generation Y. In this regard I specifically note the intense focus on future achievement/success and the perceived role of the family as a safe space/support structure for the mentioned generation. Although the youth interviewed by Nel might not be viewed as typically part of Generation Y because of their social background, it is quite clear that, in relation to the abovementioned, these young people share in some of the characteristics of this generation. However this may be Nel fails to fully indicate how the church should respond and play a role in family life and indeed if the URCSA understand the challenges faced by Generation Y. This thus remains an open question.

2006.

33 Reggie Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation. Reflecting on where we are as URCSA*, 2, 2010.

34 Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation*, 3, 2010.

35 Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation*, 5, 2010.

36 Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation*, 4, 2010.

37 Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation*, 7, 2010.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is of interest to note that the amount of theological based research on Generation Y is not readily found. This not only rings true for the discipline of Theology but also for the academic field of Education in the context of South Africa.³⁸ In my opinion it is absolutely necessary that research should be done in an attempt to explore the possibilities of better supporting and serving the needs of Generation Y.

The question that remains mostly unanswered is the following: do churches like the URCSA realise their role in family life and do their understanding of the concept *family* correlate with the current realities of the Generation Y? This does not always seem to be the case. As indicated the URCSA's focus on serving the youth is expressed through education. It is not clear how this finds expression in the context of the mentioned two youth movements and if indeed the ways for carrying across knowledge effectively speaks to the youth. In this regard Nel calls for critical dialogue with the young people, as interlocutors themselves.³⁹ This is a timely process that will, in my view aid the church and other societal structures to better minister and serve Generation Y.

As pointed out in this article the role and place of the family in the lives Generation Y stand central. In this regard the family forms a space for development and support and it can thus be argued that it can also be a place where (human) dignity is fostered. Although it is clear that the family structure plays an immense role in the lives of the mentioned generation it can also be argued that, if this structure is dysfunctional, young people, representative of this generation, will struggle immensely in their social adjustment. No other support structure is as important for this generation as the family. The role that parents play in the lives of this generation is thus vital in their own formation and should indeed not be underestimated.

However this may be Julia Fionda points out that, in the current context, adults have become even more confused regarding their role in relation to children.⁴⁰ Fionda further warns that, in an adult-centric world we must be careful not to label young people as it tends to be acted out judgmentally.⁴¹ This rings especially true for Generation Y.

As mentioned by Kruger one must always critically ask if indeed South African youth born between 1980 – 2000 can be classified as part of Generation Y. However this may be, it is clear that churches as well as other societal structures that focus on the education and development of the youth should take into account the real and unique characteristics of this generation.

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38 Kruger, Die onderrig van millenniërs, *Tydskrif vir Taal Onderrig*, 48, 2007.

39 These will be the young people within these schools and within a specific city, coming from a specific local community. See in this regard Nel, *Places/spaces of faith formation*, 3, 2010.

40 Fionda, *Devils and Angels*, 2005, 28.

41 Fionda, *Devils and Angels*, 2005, 3.

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Contact details

Dr Leslie van Rooi

Deputy Director of the Centre for Student Affairs,

Stellenbosch University

and Research Fellow of the Discipline Group of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology,

Stellenbosch University

South Africa

lbvr@sun.ac.za

+27 (0)21 808 3697